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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the model of elementary grade foreign language instruction implemented at the Baker Demonstration School in Evanston, Illinois, and offers concrete suggestions for implementing such a program. Introductory comments point out the need to observe developmental principles and practices in planning and implementing foreign language programs in the elementary schools so that the mistakes made in program implementation in the 1950s and 1960s can be avoided. A rationale and guidelines for implementing foreign language instruction in the early grades are followed by the description of the Baker model. The model integrates French into the Baker curriculum through: (1) the use of developmentally appropriate and learner-centered approaches, activities, and scheduling; (2) focus on language as a communicative tool; and (3) engagement of the children's primary models (teachers and parents) in the language learning process. The classroom teacher participates with the children in the French lesson, while parents are offered an evening course. The paper concludes with eight precepts fundamental to the Baker program. (RH)

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Integrating a foreign language into the pre-k through grade 3 class: the Baker model

Paula K. Strupeck

From a presentation to the National Association for the Education of Young Children
November, 1988 Anaheim CA

How many of you have studied a foreign language at some time in your life?
How many of you speak that language?
How many of you began learning that language before age 14?
How many of you feel that you speak this language because of your classroom experience with the language?
How many of you feel that you speak this language in spite of your classroom experience?
How many of you wish that you spoke another language?

Unfortunately, too many people feel that foreign language study was a waste of their time. Despite evidence that speaking a foreign language encourages the development of valuable skills such as flexible thinking, vocabulary, and awareness of and sensitivity to other cultures, the average American position remains: "We don't need it." "We can't speak it... Why bother?" The average American is very mistaken about the first statement: We do indeed need to learn other languages in order to remain a world leader. The average American is also capable of altering the second statement. We need to teach our children languages in ways that will help them learn to speak these other tongues. Instituting a program of developmentally appropriate goals and activities for young children through adolescence and adult, where the child begins the language early and continues through 12 grades will result in American citizens who are communicatively competent in one or more languages beyond English.

Recently, the United States Congress issued the statement: "Foreign language is as important as Math and Science to the future of our nation." The National Endowment for the

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Humanities states: "Nothing has greater potential for giving young people the expanded awareness they need than foreign language study." The Illinois State Citizens Panel on Foreign Language and International Studies comments: The misconception that English is the universal language of business is a form of cultural myopia that has created a self-imposed trade barrier more effective than any protective tariff ever enacted."

A renewed interest in foreign language is spreading across the United States as Americans recognize that we hurt ourselves financially and intellectually by remaining monolingual with a monocultural perspective. We need to have many citizens who speak at least one other language in order to remain a world leader. We need to value foreign language as part of a desirable global perspective and develop programs that teach our children to speak foreign languages in order that they be these citizens.

These programs, if they are not to repeat the nightmare of foreign language programs of the 50's and 60's must be conceived and designed carefully to respect and apply our current knowledge of child development, second language acquisition, and communication principles. The post-Sputnik flurry to institute foreign language programs resulted in hurried, ill-conceived, inappropriate programs. There was a lot of money, but no time to research, to plan, or to orchestrate. There were not enough language teachers and so native speakers with little or no training were hired. The result of this hurriedness and lack of knowledge and resources was that most programs failed...miserably. They failed not

only in their observable goal of teaching the language, but also in the sense that they influenced an entire generation and their offspring of potential language speakers and advocates to be intimidated by foreign language and to be, because of their memory of sorrowful experiences in foreign language classes against the idea of foreign language learning.

We cannot afford to make this grievous error a seccnd time. Teachers, especially those of young children must play an active part in determining the nature and content of foreign language programs. We must observe developmental principles and practices in planning and implementing foreign language in the elementary schools.(FLES).

Why start early?

Research provides strong evidence that in order to achieve a reasonable level of communicative comptetence in a foreign language, the learner needs to begin the language at a young age and follow that language throughout the school years. Like so many other of life's activities, speaking a foreign language improves with greater exposure to and fuller employ of the language. With increased competence comes greater pleasure. We tend to pursue those things that have provided us with an early positive sense of self.

A young child acquires the phonological system of a language more quickly and more accurately than an older learner. Their capacity to distinguish and imitate sounds is quite strong through about age 8. While accent is not the primary feature of note in a program emphasizing communicative competence, accent can facilitate communication. Having a facility with the sounds of the foreign language makes later

language learning and experience more pleasant. It gives us greater confidence. This confidence affects our perception of ourself as a speaker of that and other languages. We view our performance more positively and therefore undertake further language experience.

Some evidence suggests that the young child's facility with language is due in part to the elasticity of the child's brain and that after the brain lateralizes (around age 10), the learner is less able to learn languages (Lenneberg, Scovel). Some methods for teaching adults and older children have been developed based on this evidence of holistic brain activity (Asher's Total Physical Response, Lozanov's Suggestopedia). These methods attempt to imitate the child's language learning process of engaging the whole brain. A young child uses naturally those strategies that have been observed in competent language learners: They listen attentively and speak when they are ready to do so. They watch carefully. They act upon the language. They experiment and play with the language. Since children seem to do this naturally, why not maintain this readiness through appropriately planned lessons?

Further research indicates that the age of the language learner facilitates certain aspects of language learning: Older children and adults have been observed to learn vocabulary more quickly, for example. This makes developmental sense: We can only learn those concepts for which we are ready. We need to remind ourselves of the developmental nature of learning language and of developing communicative competence. We learn our first language over

time: We do not spring from the womb speaking in sophisticated, grammatically correct sentences. We listen and watch. We make sounds and imitate intonation. We progress from one-word utterances to 3. As our life experience broadens, we adopt a broader and richer vocabulary. Why do we expect foreign language learners to rise up fluent after one lesson? While learning a foreign language may not be the same as learning the first language, we need to respect the developmental nature of language learning. We need to provide appropriate longitudinal programs designed to facilitate communicative competence in the target language.

The Baker model is designed to address the notion that communicative competence is a developmental process, one that matures with time. The philosophy determines the purposes of Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) to be:

1. Put the children at ease so that they will be confident in themselves and in their ability to manipulate the language.
2. Integrate the foreign language into the daily lives of the children.
3. Facilitate the children's capacity to understand the foreign language.
4. Facilitate the children's capacity to speak the foreign language.
5. Ready and maintain the readiness of children to acquire a second language.
6. Teach strategies of language learning and comprehension.
7. Create and encourage an ambiance of pleasure and respect

8. Encourage development of global awareness and responsibility and a curiosity to learn other languages and about other peoples.

9. Engage the parents, classroom teachers, and the administration in active commitment to the language program.

The Baker program

The Parent, Teacher, and Administrative Foreign Language Task Forces chose my design for the Baker School because it is developmental. The model proposes to integrate French into the Baker curriculum through use of developmentally appropriate and learner-centered approaches, activities, and scheduling; through focus on language as a communicative tool; through engagement of the children's primary models (teachers and parents) in the language process even as their children are engaged. The classroom teacher participates with the children in the French lesson and the parents are offered an evening course. (Research in communication suggests that the perception of the message-bearer greatly affects the listener's perceptions of the message. In this case, the child's perceptions depend largely on his/her models, i.e. teachers and parents. With the teacher's participation in the French lesson, French enjoys a higher status in the child's eyes as well. It becomes more important and therefore more worthwhile. They participate more.)

Initially, and understandably, the nursery school and junior kindergarten teachers were very reluctant to permit foreign language in their classrooms. Their personal experiences of foreign language learning and their experiences with foreign language teachers in the school have discouraged them. They also expressed fear that there might be interference

with the children's first language development. In fact, evidence contradicts this notion of balance-effect, i.e. interference with first language development. Further, the teachers report that their fear of interference really stems from their fear of an inappropriate program and not from concern about interference. They report feeling awe at the degree of comprehension of French in their children.

The teachers and I arranged for me to visit their classrooms to meet and play with the children in English before I came to their room speaking and singing strange sounds that made no sense. Many foreign language teachers advocate speaking only the foreign language and never permitting the children to hear the language teacher speak the children's first language. I find that this frightens and intimidates children. This is not an immersion program. It is appropriate, indeed valuable to speak English when teaching a foreign language.

The children and teachers got to know me before we began the language experience. They trusted me and trusted that which I asked them to do. The atmosphere of the lessons is very low-key, very non-threatening. I explain to them in English the first time that we perform an activity that which I will ask of them. Further, I tell them that they will be able to figure out what I am saying and doing by watching me. I also tell them that if they do not understand, to let me know: It's okay to not understand.

Giving a child the opportunity to express fear of frustration has diffused their sense of being threatening by this unknown and confounding string of sounds. One good

example is that of Daniel, a 4-year-old who sometimes participated, but often did not. One day he simply cried out, "But you don't understand: I don't know what you're saying!" We sat down, all of us, and I said that it was ok to not understand; that sometimes it is scary and that when he did not understand or felt uncomfortable, I would understand; that I was glad that he said what he felt. I continued by repeating that watching what I was doing would often help him. Since that day, Daniel has been much more relaxed, more open, and has participated more and more. His mother reports that he is now teaching his little sister French.

It is essential in teaching a foreign language to young children that we respect and acknowledge and address their fears in order to help them be more comfortable in the language. When they are comfortable, they are far more likely to learn.

We also need not be afraid of speaking English. The children are exposed to French for 10 to 20 minutes per week. Our goals are to provide a positive experience and a foundation for further learning.

I do not require that the 3 and 4-year-olds participate in the lesson when they say that they do not want to. We are all seated or standing on the classroom's carpet. I tell them that if they prefer to watch and listen, they may. I also tell them that they may NOT talk or play with a neighbor; that this would disrupt my time and would distract the other children.

Many times, certain children will sit through an activity

the first few times. They watch and listen before they participate. This is apparent on the video tape. Their expressions and posture indicate rapt attention: They smile and laugh and watch and listen.

After each activity, I compliment them and we clap. It's great fun to hear them out in their play yard as they say to each other: "Très bien!" "Bravo!"

The pre-kindergarteners are scheduled for 2 lessons of 5 to 10 minutes per week. These begin when the teachers tell me that they feel the children are ready (Usually mid-September for the 4's and mid-October for the 3's.). The kindergarteners are scheduled for 2 days per week, with a third day added when the teacher feels that they are ready (Usually in January). Their lessons are 15 to 20 minutes.

The pre-school and kindergarten programs consist of activities that promote language readiness maintenance. I use as much natural language as possible. We sing. We dance. We move in French. Sometimes I read in French stories which are familiar to them in English. We greet each other in French. Initially, they respond to my query of, "How are you?" by showing me while I pronounce the answer for them. Later, they begin to respond on their own. I do not require that each child answer me in French. I find that they do so when they are ready.

There is no reason to correct a child's pronunciation. They are hearing new sounds and at first attempt to categorize and pronounce them according to the familiar system. With greater exposure, they begin to discover how the old system does not work and they experiment with the new. For example,

several children pronounce the French word trés /trɛ/ as /tley/ . Without teacher correction, they have, after about 3 months internalized the French sound and pronounce it as do the French: /trɛ/.

Language is a series of discoveries. A foreign language program for young children should be designed to facilitate this discovery, rather than structured as a series of didactic lessons based on a vocabulary- or grammar-based curriculum The teacher and the students should have fun.

The Baker program is based on the precepts that follow. While it is not always easy in the face of external pressures of performance and immediacy to adhere to our goals, these serve as a reminder of why we chose to follow the path that we do.

1. A foreign language program that integrates into the classroom and into the class culture, curriculum, and personality will be better accepted and consequently more successful.

2. A foreign language program that respects the child's needs and tendency to listen will ultimately produce more capable and more confident second language speakers.

3. A foreign language program that is articulated through various media and with as much natural language as possible will be more successful than a program that is grammar-based and imposes itself upon the learners.

4. A foreign language program that complements the age group, the personalities, the interests of its learners and participating teachers will contribute to second language development in a positive, nurturing, developmental manner.

5. A foreign language program where children are encouraged to communicate and to create and to have fun in the language will be a joy for teachers and learners and will result in greater acceptance of the language, greater tolerance of differences, greater interest, and greater communicative competence.

6. A program that is articulated from pre-school through grade 12 will produce more capable, more confident, more comfortable speakers of the second language.

7. A foreign language program that teaches strategies of foreign language learning will help the learners develop greater competence and confidence.

8. A foreign language program that has the full commitment and support of parents, administrators, and classroom teachers will encourage commitment in its learners and will produce more globally aware and linguistically competent citizens.

Current pre-school and kindergarten teachers are the best resources for FLES teachers who teach 3 through 6-year-olds. I urge you to act as that resource person for and to work with the FLES teacher who comes into your classroom. Trust your instincts and do not hesitate to inform the FLES teacher of an activity that you feel was inappropriate. Remember that many FLES teachers have been instructed in secondary methods; that they want the program to succeed and that everyone can benefit from your expertise; that the interests of the FLES teachers are the same as yours - provide a positive experience for these children. You may wish to incorporate 5 to 10 minutes of foreign language activity into your own teaching day if no FLES teacher is available.

The goal is to provide the most positive experience possible so that these children will remain open to foreign languages and will not suffer the block that so many Americans experience. Our goal is to encourage, support, facilitate, and revitalize our nation's global perspective in our greatest resource - our children.

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